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Letter: Ormsby responds to progress report criticism

Friday, November 18, 2005

To the editor:

I am writing in response to Mr. David Tillman's screed in your Nov. 11 edition criticizing my progress report, entitled "Two years and then some ..."

My progress report focused on a number of significant initiatives and some positive signs of progress in our local school system. Which of the items noted in this report does Mr. Tillman deplore?

Is it the nearly doubling of North Andover students taking AP courses?

Is it our setting of specific quantitative academic achievement goals - a roadmap over five years that targets raising North Andover to an academic ranking of 15 in the state (from around 60th when we started)?

Is it the replacement of a content-free, fuzzy elementary math program with a solid, back-to-basics math curriculum?

Or, maybe it's that the School Committee recently adopted an expectations initiative? This initiative requires that administrators be held accountable for specific, quantitative academic goals, that grade inflation be eliminated, that expectations be raised for student academic effort, that make-work homework assignments be curtailed, that the district clearly communicate required academic achievement levels for each grade, and that the administration investigate potentially more efficient teaching paradigms.

If these steps - to set real goals and ensure accountability - seem atypical for government-run institutions or public schools, you are right. Isn't that refreshing?

Or maybe Mr. Tillman is just upset that we don't try his M.O.M. approach: Massive Outlay of Money.

His Massive Outlay of Money approach has been the education community's panacea for the last 50 years. In the U.S., per-pupil expenditures are 3 1/2 times higher today than in 1960 - in constant dollars - while academic outcomes have been stagnant or worsened. A 71 percent drop in efficiency. Locally, the Beacon Hill Institute's report "Getting Less For More: Lessons in Massachusetts Education Reform" (beaconhill.org) studied the efficacy of education spending in

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Massachusetts and found no measurable improvement, and even some declines in academic outcomes, resulting from the massive increases in state funding from the 1993 Education Reform Act.

Let me conclude by correcting several of Mr. Tillman's "analyses."

First, the poor academic results in our elementary math and reading, noted in my report and cited by Mr. Tillman, are directly attributable to the fuzzy math and the nearly curriculum-free, spelling-free, phonics-free, and grammar-free literacy program that M.O.M. supported. Only the math program has been replaced and that occurred just two months ago.

Second, Mr. Tillman supports his Major Outlay of Money approach by indicating that in "our economy," the way it works is that "cost equals value", implying that if we spend more we will get more. Maybe, in addition to reviewing the results of the last half century referenced above, Mr. Tillman might want to consider that "our economy" is really split into two segments: the private, or free-market economy, and the government segment (one can hardly call it an economy!). The "cost equals value" rule only applies to the private market so it's no surprise that his example (Kia vs. Porsche) was taken from the private economy. Maybe Mr. Tillman can explain why academic outcomes in public schools and expenditures per student are uncorrelated (an amazing accomplishment when you think about it!), proving that, in public education, cost and value are complete strangers. Only government can arrange its affairs to produce such a strange result.

Third, Mr. Tillman accuses me of desiring to cut teachers' pay. Quite the contrary, I have been very vocal in my support of a merit pay system for rewarding superior teachers and tried in vain to have it incorporated in our recent teachers' contract. The sad fact is that the union-backed, lock-step approach to teacher's pay, backed by a time-tested list of excuses, prohibits us from properly rewarding our best teachers, resulting in a net reduction in the average quality of our teaching staff.

Finally, Mr. Tillman's economic analysis of the tax/school funding issue is so confused and filled with errors that I'm surprised he had the audacity to put CFA after his signature. I'll just offer him a few hints and maybe he can get himself back on track.

Mr. Tillman takes a single month's inflation figure (September) and declares it to be the prevailing inflation rate. This is silly. Was Mr. Tillman on the moon when gas prices skyrocketed to \$3.50 per gallon in September only to return to under \$2.10 recently - or did he just make a sneaky choice? Mr. Tillman emphasizes that creativity and innovation drive the American economy and cites software, computers and airplanes as examples. He then attributes these successes to art, music and (believe it or not) athletics. Excuse me! I would attribute these innovations to literacy, science, and mathematics - three core academic subjects that are rife with creativity and innovation but that, unfortunately, are in decline in the U.S. It's a decline that we should be intent on reversing. Does Mr. Tillman really think our local taxes only increase 2.5 percent per year? The average property tax bill for families

in North Andover in 1997 was \$3,021. Eight years later it is \$5,288. This amounts to a compound rate of increase of 7.25 percent per year. Enough is enough.

I won't attempt to grade Mr. Tillman's reply to my progress report. I'll leave that exercise to the reader.

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